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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MOSCOW 005506

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/23/2017  
TAGS: PGOV KDEM PINR SOCI RS  
SUBJECT: "JUST RUSSIA" STRUGGLES

REF: A. MOSCOW 5410  
      B. MOSCOW 5355

Classified By: POL M/C Alice G. Wells. Reason: 1.4 (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: With elections just over one week away, the Kremlin-fostered party Just Russia (SR) seems increasingly unlikely to cross the seven-percent threshold to Duma representation, and the media have begun their death watch. Observers peg SR's problems to Putin's decision to head the United Russia list, SR Chairman Mironov's sub-par organizational skills, and the near-theological challenge for SR of loving Putin but hating the United Russia party he represents. It remains possible that the Kremlin may nudge SR, which by most counts is polling at about five percent, into the Duma. If it does not, then its more opportunistic members may head for greener pastures while the rest resume life in the three parties from which SR was formed about one year ago. End summary.

Great Expectations

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¶2. (SBU) Recent polls show the Just Russia (SR) party at about five percent of the vote with just over one week remaining until the December 2 Duma elections. SR has failed to meet the high expectations sketched for it when it was created in October 2006. At that time, it was touted as a Kremlin project, and there was much talk of it being the second in what would eventually become a managed, two-party system. SR was reportedly groomed as the left-wing alternative to the Kremlin's United Russia (YR), and it was speculated that it would be a haven for those in the regional elite who had not succeeded in finding a home in YR.

¶3. (SBU) SR's debut in the March 2007 regional elections seemed to put the party solidly on the political map. It finished first in Stavropol, second in four other of the fourteen regions, and polled an average of 15 percent across all of the races. Experts expected that SR would continue to consolidate its gains, especially since the March contests had shown wary regional leaders and businessmen that the Kremlin was prepared to tolerate two ruling parties. In Lipetsk, Putin had even allowed the party to use his image as part of its election campaign.

The Downward Slope

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¶4. (C) According to International Institute of Political Expertise General Director Yevgeniy Minchenko, however, the March regionals were the beginning of the end for SR. Analysis of the party's victory in Stavropol showed that SR's votes had come at the expense of United Russia, when the intended vote donor was to have been the Communist Party. The prospect of two Kremlin projects fighting for the same vote pool cooled official enthusiasm for SR, Minchenko thought, and it was at that point that the wind began to go out of the

party's sails.

¶ 15. (C) Contributing to SR's decline, according to Minchenko, was the confusion created in the regions by the presence of two official parties. Local authorities are "unable to handle difficult scenarios," Minchenko said, and providing administrative support for two contending parties was beyond the ken of those used to "supporting one, squashing the rest." There was much turmoil in the regions as elites affiliated themselves with one or another of the parties, then attempted to eliminate their newfound opponent, instead of letting it co-exist.

Bad Management, Bad Luck

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¶ 16. (C) Party Chairman Sergey Mironov's sub-par organizational skills and lackluster personality did little to aid SR's fortunes. Mironov allowed inter-elite conflicts in the regions to fester, and he seemed to spend more time in the months following the March regional elections stumping for Putin than campaigning for his own party. Minchenko accused Mironov of having assembled a "weak, corrupt" team for the December 2 elections, and of failing to identify his electorate.

¶ 17. (SBU) SR's flagging fortunes sank further on October 1, when Putin announced that he would lead rival YR's party list into the December 2 Duma elections. In the stampede to United Russia that followed, SR was swept to the sidelines. Mironov faced party defections, harassment of SR in the regions as local leaders struggled to demonstrate their loyalty to the President, and what amounted to a political mind-body problem as he attempted to explain how he could

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remain loyal to Putin but in mortal combat with the President's political party.

¶ 18. (C) In spite of all that bad news, a weary SR St. Petersburg list candidate Oksana Dmitrieva on November 19 summed up SR's December 2 prospects as "good." Dmitrieva arrived at her optimism by ignoring recent polling, which she described as "designed to discourage SR voters from voting." (VTsIOM reported on November 21 that SR could expect to win 4.9 percent of the vote. In its November 16 poll, Levada predicted that SR would garner four percent of the vote, one percentage point lower than the five percent than in Levada's last sampling. The electoral law prohibits publication of polls during the five days preceding the elections.)

¶ 19. (C) Dmitrieva, who had been a party for the Development of Entrepreneurship individual-mandate Duma Deputy until switching to SR in July, reluctantly admitted that Mironov has provided uninspired leadership. She noted that after being skewered by SPS's Boris Nemtsov during a disastrous November 7 debate debut (ref a), SR's Executive Committee had decided to have Dmitrieva debate instead. Dmitrieva also laid many party list mistakes at the feet of Mironov's campaign brain trust. "Those who could have created a real party," were not given a chance to participate, she lamented. Some that were included on SR party lists --Dmitrieva mentioned former LDPR member Aleksey Mitrofanov, oligarch Aleksandr Lebedev, and youth leader Sergey Shargunov-- should not have been. Lebedev's efforts to take on YR's Moscow Mayor Luzhkov had been stillborn, and it had been a "wise decision" to remove him from the head of the Moscow party list. More disastrous still had been the decision to have Shargunov in the federal troika. His departure, after it was revealed that he had criticized Putin, had created turmoil in the party.

Pressure in St. Petersburg

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¶ 10. (C) Putin's decision to head the United Russia list had dimmed SR's prospects in Dmitrieva's St. Petersburg, where SR

had gotten 21.90 percent of the votes in the March regional election. Minchenko noted that the fact that St. Petersburg was Putin's hometown had placed additional pressure on the local administration to produce a convincing tally for United Russia. Adding to the pressure was Governor Valentina Matvienko's November 9 decision to join United Russia's St. Petersburg list. "I had assumed I would be competing only against (United Russia Chairman) Gryzlov, Dmitrieva said.

¶11. (C) Coinciding with Matvienko's entry into the race had been the deployment of administrative resources against SR. Dmitrieva ticked off the following tactics that her party in St. Petersburg had endured to date:

-- on the night of November 1 - 2, the Petersburg Transport Company refused to allow SR campaign ads to be affixed to the sides of buses in one bus park, while having those already affixed removed from buses in a second bus park;

-- Dmitrieva showed pictures of informational posters displayed in military units that, in violation of electoral law, call on the soldiers to vote for United Russia;

-- distribution of anonymous leaflets alleging that SR had somehow provoked price increases in order to gain an advantage in the election campaign;

-- state employees are being forced to register for absentee ballots that will allow them to cast their votes at specially-organized polling places that are under the thumb of the authorities;

-- state employees are being ordered to use their cellphones to photograph their ballots, in order to demonstrate that they voted for YR;

-- there is widespread intimidation of entrepreneurs who have been supporting SR.

¶12. (C) Dmitrieva also highlighted difficulties in advertising on the streets of St. Petersburg. The local election commission had been vigilant, she alleged, in enforcing the law, which prevents the affixing of campaign materials to private property. The commission's rigid interpretation of the law forced SR to buy expensive billboard space or engage in inventive but less effective practices, like posting "strip" posters on drainpipes, which were not considered private property.

#### The Future of the Party

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¶13. (C) Minchenko noted that SR's treatment at the hands of the Petersburg administration was consistent with what he said was a Kremlin directive freeing local administrations to "do as they pleased" with SR. Dmitrieva reported that SR in Irkutsk where her husband Ivan Grachev was running, had encountered little resistance from the authorities. An earlier attempt by Grachev to get on the list in Tatarstan had been stymied by "local SR clans" who had candidates of their own that they wanted on the list. SR's Penza list leader Aleksey Mitrofanov told us separately (ref b) that the party was encountering fierce resistance in that region. SR had taken hits in other regions as well. The Stavropol region's Duma Chairman Andrey Utkin left the party during the campaign, and it is expected that SR's Stavropol Duma faction will cease to exist. SR will not participate in the Kamchatka regional elections, because more than half of its list members have resigned.

¶14. (SBU) In their pre-election post-mortems, political scientists Dmitriy Orlov (who is linked to United Russia) and Aleksey Chadaev (who is in the Public Chamber) forecast that SR would not be represented in the next Duma. Orlov

predicted that SR would join the Agrarians, Yabloko, and SPS in the purgatory of parties which receive more than three percent of the vote and exist on the fringes of political life. Chadaev guessed that such an outcome would mean the end of SR, because the continued existence of the unlikely coalition of the Party of Life, Rodina, and the Pensioners Party from which SR was formed had been premised on electoral success. Orlov agreed, noting that, unlike the Agrarian Party, SR does not have the industry lobbyists, trade unions, and connections with other social/economic structures that would allow it to survive defeat.

¶15. (C) Sounding a contrarian note, Kremlin hack and United Russia candidate Sergey Markov told us that SR still had a chance at political survival and speculated that Putin would "make some gesture" that would push Mironov's party over the threshold. Markov added that Just Russia was a good idea but politically premature: Russia needed stability more than a strong two-party system. Markov takes issue with polling data that posits a two-party Duma, betting instead on a minor presence by both Just Russia and Zhirinovskiy's LDPR.

Comment

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¶15. (C) Polling margins of error and Mironov's slavish loyalty to Putin (Mironov November 14 announced that he would happily cede his day job, as Speaker of the Federation Council, to the President) could yet combine to bring Just Russia into the Duma on December 2. In what is perhaps a sign that the party may live to see another day, the Kremlin-linked public opinion research firm Foundation of Public Opinion predicted November 22, as a result of a survey conducted November 17 - 18, that SR could win seven percent of the vote. Whatever the result, SR's performance on December 2 will not be what the party's founders envisioned a year ago, and will be well below its tallies in the March regional elections.

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